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# Internal Reasons and the Limits of Philosophy

Catherine Wilson

*Abstract:* Williams's views on the importance of internal reasons and his denial that there can be reasons for an agent to do something that have no relationship to their extendible motivational set are the key to his critical view of moral theory and moral theorists. The paper offers a qualified defense of his position on both counts, noting where adjustments to it are needed.

*Keywords:* morality; Williams; utilitarianism; demandingness; practical reason; moral motivation, internal reasons, external reasons

One of Bernard Williams's central philosophical preoccupations was with the particularity of persons and the force of their needs and desires. He saw this feature writ large in the particularities of their surrounding cultures, with their distinctive perspectives and requisites. In his essays 'Internal and External Reasons' (1981: 101-113) and 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame' (1989), he employed the term 'motivational set', to refer to an agent's "dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects...embodying commitments of the agent." (1985: 105). Many of his writings dealt with the conflict he perceived between empirically real motivational sets and the generic formulas of obligation of modern moral theory. "Unless", he declared, "I am propelled forward by the conatus of desire, project, and interest, it is unclear why I should go on at all: the world, certainly, as a kingdom of moral agents, has no particular claim on my presence or, indeed, interest in it." (1985: 12).

Philosophy, Williams declared in the first chapter of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, "should not try to produce ethical theory, though this does not mean that philosophy cannot offer any critique of ethical beliefs and ideas." (1985: 17). Practical thought, he insisted, must ask and answer the question 'what shall I do?' (21). And the answer to that question, he argued, is impor-


tantly personal; there could be no ‘decision procedure for moral reasoning’,<sup>11</sup> nor any listing or tree structure of objective moral facts. Science, the old ‘natural philosophy’ aims to produce a representation of the world that is ‘independent of our perspective and its peculiarities’, but moral philosophy cannot do the equivalent (1978: 65-6; 1985: 139). Medical theory and the science of materials, by contrast, prove themselves by their efficacy. The prevention of premature death and disability and the construction of buildings and bridges that stay up are universally valued conditions. But philosophy cannot prove its worth through its efficacy in the same way; there is no universally valued condition – that of the morally healthy person or society – and even if there were, there would be no way to ‘apply’ moral theory to bring this condition about without extreme coercion. Individual persons are not required by any meta-obligation always to test their proposed courses of action against a theoretical norm, nor are entire societies required to do so. In both cases, there are likely to be incremental adjustments as features of their situations become clearer to them through experience. Perfectionism and utopianism are both misguided. We can only adjust our plans and our practices and institutions as our needs and desires change.<sup>22</sup>

The theory of internal reasons upon which these conclusions rest not only runs up against strong and frequent objections, it is inconsistent with Williams’s view of ethics as the shared knowledge and practice of a culture or a subculture. The contradiction manifests itself in his puzzlement over the phenomenon of blame in his essay on the ‘Obscurity of Blame’, where he admits that people can be blamed for failing to perform actions they had no reason to perform. Fortunately, both difficulties can be removed and both Williams’s antirealism and the substance of his plea for the individual defended by re-analysing the notion of an internal reason. This involves taking reason-giving to be a discursive activity that always involving a presenter and a presentee. A presented reason must belong to *someone’s* motivational set, though not necessarily that of the presentee who may deny that it is a reason at all.

Before going on to provide this re-analysis, I will give some further background to explain Williams’s negative attitude to moral theory. After supplying it, I will address the objection that Williams misjudged the relationship between nonmoral practical reasoning and moral reasoning. Moral reasons are inherently generic; this feature derives from their function which is the protection of persons from one another, rather than the protection of persons from

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rawls 1951.

<sup>2</sup> For a defense of such incrementalism, see Sen 2009: 263: “I would like to wish good luck to the builders of a transcendentially just set of institutions for the whole world”.

 bad luck or the world in general. By their very nature, moral reasons will often feel like unwanted impositions and consistency with one's motivational set is not required for a moral reason's being so. Here Williams's view of the limits of philosophy can still be defended, but only to an extent that is in turn limited.

### 1. *Context: Anti-Theory*

One of Williams's points in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was that modern moral theory retained an essentially theological perspective, as signaled in its vocabulary of judgement, assessment, approval and disapproval (1985: 37-8).<sup>3</sup> Christian ethics had addressed itself to the soul, declaring wealth, status, and gender irrelevant to salvation and advocating the setting aside of family ties. Kant's noumenal self, a pure will without any empirically interesting qualities, was the secular substitute for this anonymous, but nevertheless responsible soul. Bentham's hedonic machine that is Everyman was similarly anonymised. Williams shared with a number of his contemporaries the conviction that the Enlightenment project of rationalising morality had failed, but he had no patience with their view that moral theory needed to return to its theological roots.<sup>44</sup> We should treat God as a dead person, he declared (1985: 32-3); his attitude to Kantianism was that of Friedrich Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*. Like Nietzsche, he looked back to the Greeks, to whom (apart from the Stoics) the idea of a science of general obligations and moral imperatives was foreign.

As Williams saw it, with the rise of post-Humean moral theory, ethics, which, in ancient philosophy, had been the study of character traits, attitudes conducive to tranquillity, and sensible choices, became morality, the study of duty and self-sacrifice. Moral theory addresses itself to requirements and obligations, not to the special requirements and obligations imposed by roles or offices, such as being a spouse, or father, or judge, but instead duties pertaining to agents as such. Kant's proposal that action plans should be formulated as maxims and subjected to a test of their universalisability and Bentham's proposal that policies should aim at the general welfare were both aimed at dissolving the natural egocentrism and partiality of agents. More recent conceptual devices, such as Rawls's famous 'veil of ignorance', are based on the idea that not knowing yourself, being unaware of your talents, weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and position in society, is the first step to sound ethical


<sup>3</sup> A point earlier made by Mackie 1977: 45.

<sup>44</sup> See. Anscombe 1958; McIntyre, 1981; and Taylor 1992, esp. Ch. 25, 'The Conflicts of Modernity'.

decisions. It might be observed that, as if to compensate for the abstractions of moral theory, our culture provides a superabundance of how-to-live advice pertaining to relationships that is detailed and specific and that takes account of individual differences, rendering Williams's intellectual nostalgia somewhat beside the point. But lifestyle advice is not philosophy, and although Williams saw philosophy as limited in what it could do, moral philosophy remained a field of enquiry.

Like the pagans, Williams regarded ethics as the study of how to cope with the unpredictability and vicissitudes of life and with the inevitability of one's making trouble for other people. He rejected the view that a secularised, rationalistic moral theory could demonstrate the existence of obligations or decisive reasons for doing and forbearing that were 'binding' on agents regardless of their own motivational sets. The pretensions of the 'morality system' to be able to pronounce for or against each of anyone's significant actions and the pretensions of philosophers to be able to produce the criteria of right and wrong in the morality system both deserved to be questioned. Williams objected on both metaethical and substantive grounds to modern moral theory. On the metaethical side, while acknowledging the occurrence of moral reflection and deliberation as empirical phenomena, he denied that their results could issue in the kind of knowledge that the experimental and theoretical sciences sought and attained. In his intentionally paradoxical formulation, reflection can destroy ethical knowledge (1985: 148). On the substantive side, he entered a plea for agents who, in certain circumstances, act unreflectively or contrary to utilitarian principles, who show favouritism and who make exceptions of themselves, weighting their own impulses and their satisfaction as more important than other people's welfare. His view that all reasons for action are 'internal reasons' commands a central position in his overall outlook.

## 2. *Internal Reasons in Williams's Account*


For the strict and unreconstructed Kantian, as noted, a decisive reason to forbear from some self-serving action is that you would be unable to will that ny others in your situation were permitted to do likewise. For the strict and unreconstructed Utilitarian, a decisive reason to perform some action is that it leads to a net increase in welfare. These are reasons for everyone; to ignore them, once they have been presented to you as reasons to do or not to do what you were contemplating, is to manifest irrationality or ignorance of human nature and the universal desire to escape pain and maximise pleasure.


Williams took strong exception to the notion that any presented reason,

either by virtue of some quasi-logical property such as susceptibility to universalisation, or some naturalistic property, such as the contribution to the general welfare, could be a decisive reason for the presentee to act or refrain from acting, or impose an obligation on the presentee, regardless of the presentee's motivational set. What a person has reason to do must be related positively to their 'motivational set' – or to a motivational set sufficiently closely related that, without coercion or brainwashing, they could come to internalize the presented reasons. As Williams understood it, "A has a reason to  $\Phi$  only if he could reach the conclusion to  $\Phi$  by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has." (1989: 35). We could characterise such reasons as having a positive relationship to A's 'extendible' motivational set. The notion of such a set is, Williams admitted, difficult to make precise. It does not consist of the motivations a person would have if they were ideally rational, knew everything they ought to know, and had the preferences, desires and interests they ought to have.<sup>5</sup> Reasons, he thought, must be accessible to the agent as they are, even with their limitations and biases. The conclusions reached by sound deliberative routes about what to do in a given situation must accordingly be different in at least some cases for Person 1 and Person 2. Some people will deliberate and decide to push the fat man off the bridge to stop the runaway train or to kill one to save nineteen; others will deliberate and walk away from the situation, refusing to get blood on their hands.

The extendible motivational set accordingly occupies the region between the introspectively available, empirically real, motivational set and the one that would result from removing *all* errors, biases, knowledge gaps, and distortions from a person's set of beliefs and desires. It is the one that would result from removing *some* errors, biases, knowledge-gaps and distortions in ways that can be grasped only by reference to examples. Informing a person about to drink a glass of petrol in the mistaken belief that it is gin about what's actually in it will result in rapid revision of their motivational set (1981: 102), leaving them with a decisive reason not to drink it, and most people's motivational sets is extendible by making them aware of facts almost everyone in their situation would like to know. Pointing out to the suicidal teenager the fact that everything will look better in three months if she stays her hand may, however, have no effect. Her project is self-destruction now, and she may remain wholeheartedly committed to this. Nevertheless, forcible restraint is warranted on the grounds that the teenager's future motivational set will be such that she will come to recognise despondency of the sort she was suffering either as no sort of reason

<sup>5</sup> For a defense of the notion that what you have decisive reason to do and ought to do is what your ideally rational and thoroughly informed self would do, see Smith 1994 and Korsgaard 1986.

 at all for suicide or at least not as a decisive reason (1985: 41-2). She will then want it to have been the case that no-one let her do it. Our knowledge of the (overwhelmingly likely) future supplies us with a warrant for removing the aspiration to suicide from her extended motivational set.

 In another of Williams's fictional examples Owen Wingrave is unresponsive to the considerations urged on him by his father, who wants him to join the army (1981: 106-7). It's a family tradition, his father insists, it's the patriotic thing to do, and the threat to the nation is grave. But Owen, being who is, he is unmoved by this discourse; these citation are merely presented considerations, offering at best 'pro tanto' and not decisive reasons. His motivational set is not extendible enough for him to see that he has good reason to join the army, that he ought to do so. Williams's 'Gauguin' in turn sees that there are good moral reasons for a father to remain with and support his wife and children, but he cannot acknowledge them as decisive. His strongest motivation arises from his project of getting away from civilisation and developing as a painter. The reader who condemns him for violation of a Kantian duty, or simply for failing to weigh up utilitarian pluses and minuses in his deliberation, is in effect presenting his or her motivating reasons, but these cannot be shown to be more binding on Gauguin than the urgings of Owen's father are on Owen.

The claim that all reasons for an agent are internal reasons is consistent with empirical approaches to moral psychology, with an empiricist approach to normativity and the demystification of moral metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> That in morally demanding situations we feel dutiful, compelled by a principle, or driven by conscience, imbued with a sense of necessity, does not indicate that moral musts and permissions, grounded in decisive reasons and in their absence, are objective features of the world. We err in confusing the gravity of morally demanding situations with the existence of decisive reasons to do or forbear independent of all feelings and perspectives.<sup>7</sup>

The doctrine that all reasons are someone's internal reasons has a group analogue and the naturalistic perspective is systematically connected to Williams's scepticism regarding the possibility of meaningful moral criticism across large historical or cultural divides. Williams disavowed relativism as a theory, but he was inclined to a form of nonjudgementalism with his distinction between 'notional' and 'real' confrontations. The motivational sets of Aztecs and Samurai warriors were so distant from our own that no simple extension of them could have altered their treatment of captives and peasants. Presenting them with reasons drawn from Kant (sacrificing captives and slaying peasants is treating

<sup>6</sup> See Prinz 2007 and Joyce 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See Mackie 1977, Ch. 1.

them as a means, not as ends in themselves; clearly you would be unwilling to universalise the maxim) or from Bentham (the pains of a multitude of peasants outweigh the pleasures of small bands of warriors) would draw blanks.

The weak motivational force of modern moral philosophy is not only evident when one imagines its considerations being presented in such remote contexts. It is apparent in the resistance to utilitarian demands, for example, for reductions in luxury consumption, for vegetarianism, for higher taxes for the rich, that elicit the response, 'I can see that that would be the rational/welfare enhancing thing to do, but I cannot extend my motivational set to recognise as decisive the reasons you present me with.' As Thomas Nagel remarks, I could stop going to restaurants and donate the money saved to charity, but it would take an act of conversion (Nagel 1986: 190).


For a culture to have a reason to change its practices on the grounds that they are cruel, exploitative, 'barbaric' or just selfish, it must be the case that its personnel could come to repudiate their existing practice through a sound deliberative route in a way that differentiates between Society 1, for whom reform is accessible from where they are now, and Society 2, for whom it is not. In insisting that the men of Society 2 have decisive reason to stop beating their womenfolk, and that the women of society 2 have decisive reason to stop putting up with this from their menfolk, or that its elders have decisive reason for not sending its children into textile factories, despite the inaccessibility of these reasons from where they are now, we can only mean, according to Williams that the world would be a better place if these practices came to an end. We are entitled to moral confidence that it would be a better place and that grave moral harms would no longer be perpetrated. We need not relinquish our habits of judgement or even suppress our feelings of blame. We can hope that reasons that are not accessible to them now will become so. But this can only happen when the problems of authority or honour or poverty that the practices are meant to solve cease to face them with such urgency, or are seen to be soluble in another way.

### 3. *'External' Reasons are Presenter Internal*

The rejection of all external reasons of the sort moral philosophy is supposed to provide runs up against the objection that, commonsensically, it is often the case that people have reason to do things and ought to do things they are not motivated to do, and would not or could not be motivated to do, even with access to better information about how the world is and what is likely to happen. External reasons seem to apply to the cases of agents who are not only



ignorant of them but unresponsive to their being presented. They seem to be discoverable in reflection and deliberation, just as agents can also discover that something they took to be a reason is not even a consideration.<sup>8</sup>

External reasons dependent on no one in particular's motivational set seem to function in the case of applied logic and mathematics. That P implies Q is a decisive reason for you to infer Q, given P. You ought to do so and you are – it seems – objectively in the wrong if you fail to do so. The meaning of the terms provides a decisive reason as well to write '49' given the arithmetic problem   $7 \times 7 = ?$ . When it comes to doing or forbearing in the realm of practical action there seem to be reasons that are equally objective and decisive. A tourist ought not to walk in the jungle without sturdy, snake-proof footwear, whether they realize this or not and regardless of their barefoot preferences. If, having been presented with the information that there are snakes in this jungle, you persist in denying that you have a reason to wear shoes, you are, it seems, just wrong. You really ought to wear shoes.

As observed in connection with the suicidal teenager, frequently, reasons for doing or forbearing in the practical realm are actively resisted by those to whom they are presented. In ordinary conversation, reasons are urged precisely upon those people who may be aware of them as considerations but who appear to care insufficiently about them. If a motive belongs to someone's existing motivational set, they will already be acting in accord with it. So the point of presenting reasons can only be to try to extend the presentees motivational set in a way considered appropriate by the presenter. But if the effort fails, it can seem that it is still the case that the presentee ought to do the thing and has decisive reasons to do so. Here are some examples of normative reasons that seem to apply to people even when they are absent from their extendible motivational sets:<sup>9</sup>

*A reason not to smoke is that smoking causes a variety of unpleasant illnesses and premature death.*

*A reason to save money is that someday you may be unable to earn it.*

*A reason for your nearsighted child to get glasses is to be able to see the blackboard in school.*

There are two responses a defender of Williams might make at this point.

First, the smoker, the spendthrift and the parents of the nearsighted child either have extendible motivational sets that will acknowledge the consider-

<sup>8</sup> Scanlon 2014 argues for domain-specific ontologies that can accommodate moral reasons independent of motivational sets.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the phenomenon of resistance to reasons, v. Milgram 1996.

ations cited if they are presented, in which case these are indeed reasons for them. Alternatively, as in Owen's case, they may resist, perhaps because there is some special feature of their own situation that makes this generally good advice irrelevant. Some prudential reasons just don't in apply to individuals. For some people, it's false that they shouldn't smoke because they will die soon anyway of unrelated causes, and it gives them a lot of pleasure; others need not save money. It is not hard to think what circumstances could falsify the proposal that nearsighted Sally ought to get glasses because of something unusual about her condition. If Sally would rather die than wear glasses, some other solution to her blackboard problem will need to be found. When it comes to the higher mathematics, it is wrong to insist that everybody, including little children and illiterate peasants of the Caucasus ought to give, has reason to give, the correct solution to some partial derivative equation because they cannot. But there is nothing special about the presented considerations that make them decisive reasons. Something cannot attain the ontological status of an external reason just because, on some occasions, persons who reject a presented reason as irrelevant to them appear to be behaving unreasonably, or self-destructively.

A second possible response is that, as 'ought' suggests capability, but does not imply 'can,' where the actor envisioned is concerned, 'have reason to do' suggests a fit with the actors extendible motivational set, where the actor envisioned is concerned, without implying it. As Moti Mizrahi argues, a pathologically jealous person ought to be more trusting of their spouse, even if they are psychologically unable to repress or rid themselves of their emotion (Mizrahi 2009). The motivational set that grounds the reason may be that of the presenter rather than the presentee. (The world would be an overall better place, we can agree, if this person were not a jealous maniac.) The internalists will accordingly need to modify their account. We begin by insisting that the 'reasons statements' cited represent assertions S could make in an advice-giving session to an agent A in which S is presenting reasons for A to  $\Phi$ , and A is considering them, taking them on board, waving them away, indignantly rejecting them, or displaying some other form of acceptance or rejection. Someone S who presents R as a decisive reason for A to  $\Phi$ , as in the cases above, implies *either* that R would be an element of S's own motivational set if S were in A's position, or (in case S feels himself to be an exception), that people like A generally have R in their extendible motivational set; they *can* get to R even if they are not there yet. If we, considering the case, agree with S that A has decisive reason to  $\Phi$ , and ought to  $\Phi$ , whether A agrees or not, we are in the same epistemic position as S. We are virtually presenting R to A.



The upshot is that, contrary to what Williams's appeared to claim, there are

practical reasons that apply to but do not belong to the extendible motivational sets of their targets. They qualify as reasons, however, only because of their relation to the motivational sets of an assumed presenter or an assumed community. All this was well understood by Adam Smith who supposed that the assessment of behaviour (in this case, planned behaviour) always took place against a background of opinions concerning ‘propriety’ as he called it, the appropriateness of values and the ability of people to realise them.<sup>10</sup> People in general are motivated not to be sick and to die prematurely, not to be impoverished, and to furnish their children with an education. Our grasp of reasons and oughts has a factual feel to it that obscures its dependence on culture-specific aims and values.

Presented reasons are nevertheless ‘internal’ to S or S’s community, and the consideration S presents to A as a reason will only be accepted by A if A is able to find it in or incorporate it into their motivational set. Further:

- 1) Even ‘common’ motivations are to some extent culturally specific. We can imagine flourishing human communities in which quitting smoking, saving money, and seeing the blackboard or succeeding in school are irrelevant to their way of life. There is no ‘domain’ of practical reason as such.
- 2) Even in contexts and cases in which such reasons are generally decisive and people generally ought to do these things, there may be special features of the individual case that make the presented reasons nugatory.
- 3) There is a continuum between presented reasons that reflect common motivations and values and presented reasons that reflect only the values and motivations of subgroups or individuals. Owen’s father’s presented reasons are interesting in this regard. Family traditions and patriotism lie somewhere in between the two extremes.

To sum up and formalize, the problem of internal and external reasons is in some respects a problem of language. The following argument seems correct on first reading.

- 1) It would be incoherent to suggest that a person ought to do something they have no reason to do.
- 2) What a person has reason to do must be related positively to their ‘motivational set,’ more precisely to their ‘extendible



<sup>10</sup> Smith 2010 Part I, Sect. 1, ch 3, *et passim*.

motivational set,' understood empirically and not idealistically.

- 3) So, what a person ought to do must be related positively to their extendible motivational set.



But then, contradicting 3):

- 4) It is often the case that people have reason to do, and ought to do things they are not at all motivated to do and that lie outside their extendible motivational sets.

1) is however ambiguous. It can be read as:

- 1a) It would be incoherent (for me) to suggest that a person ought to do something they have (from my perspective) no reason to do.  
 1b) It would be incoherent (for me) to suggest that a person ought to do something they have (from their perspective) no reason to do.

The 1a) reading makes a true statement. But it does not imply 2) and 3). It is consistent with 4) so we have no problem. The 1b) reading does not make a true statement. So 2) and 3) do not follow, and there is no conflict with 4). At the same time, the possibility of asserting 1) in its b) sense, does not show that there are reasons and 'oughts' independent of all motivational sets. It would be incoherent *for me* to assert that a person has reason to do and ought to do something that belongs neither to their, nor to my extendible motivational set, nor to that I suppose internal to other reasonable people.

There is no barrier to thinking 'There are perhaps some things I really ought to do that I am not currently motivated to do and could not be persuaded to want to do.' This just means: perhaps I shall someday develop some new motivations and 'recognise' some new decisive reasons.

Blame, on the analysis given, is not obscure in the way that puzzled Williams. We sometimes blame people for doing things they had, from their perspective, no reason to do, because we view them as having resisted or ignored reasons that, from our own internal perspectives, should have and could have been part of their motivational sets. ('I told him and told him!') In other situations we do not blame them, recognising that it would have been too much to have expected them to act on the presented reasons.

#### 4. *The Disunity of Practical Reason*

There is another reason for questioning the exclusivity of internal reasons. It is substantive rather than metaethical. Arguably, Williams did not recognise the distinctive nature of moral deliberation. There is a profound difference, the critic of internalism might argue, between, on one hand, cultural practices that make sense or fail to in different environments, and that are backed by locally relevant reasons, and moral practices on the other. There is also a profound difference between 'exceptions' made for individuals from generally applicable practical 'oughts' such as saving money or wearing glasses and 'exceptions' made for individuals from moral 'oughts' such as telling the truth.

Morality, with its formulas of obligation, prohibition, and permission, concerns the harms that individuals do to those near them, and that groups do to other nearby groups, in pursuit of their own comfort and enjoyment or advancement. The 'morality system' curbs the exercise of power and privilege in strong and fortunate individuals and groups. Because it is revisionary and constraining, it invites bids for exemptions and exceptions, but such bids on the part of the powerful and privileged are unacceptable by definition. Further, the critic maintains, moral practices are intended to reflect the deepest human needs, vulnerabilities and capabilities; accordingly, good moral practices must be good for any and all cultures.

Someone can dissociate themselves from the values of logical acumen, arithmetical competence, safety, thrift and other common values, the critic of moral internalism continues, insisting that, being who they are, having the motivational set they do, certain presented reasons for acting or forbearing do not apply to them, and we observers can recognise that their claim for an exemption is valid, that what's good practical advice for most people isn't for them. But someone who claims to dissociate from the values of honesty, kindness, co-operation, and trustworthiness, because of who they are, because, having the motivational set they do, they are exempt from the moral oughts applicable to most people, can never, it seems, be endorsed in this opinion. Cross-cultural moral criticism, and the criticism of morally careless individuals, is not like the pointless criticism of foreign table manners or unmathematical grown ups.

In prudential deliberation and advising we normally start with a rough conception of what the average person ought to do and refine it in light of the ways in which this individual – who may be myself – may be different in their needs or abilities. Nobody would make medical or financial decisions about themselves as if from behind the veil of ignorance or offer advice to other as though nothing whatsoever about the situation and character of the presentee were to be taken into account. But Williams opens himself up to the objection

that he assimilates moral to practical reasoning in his 'Gauguin' case (1981: 20-39) by bringing luck and success into the picture, encouraging the mistaken impression that Gauguin's problem is mainly whether to take the risk of failing to become a successful artist. In moral deliberation and advising, it seems, we start with the individual predicament and try to elevate it to a more general one. Moral argument involves an attempt to persuade people and groups that they are *not special*, in the strength of their appetites and capabilities, or in their status or relationships, or even the painfulness of their dilemmas, and that they cannot claim exemptions that would not be available to everyone else. The exact same temptation to lie or thief or betray has faced tens of thousands or millions of other people, and, if you were on the receiving end, we remind the presentee of a moral reason, you wouldn't like having done to you what you are about to do to someone else. Moral theory predicts our resistance to exceptionalism and codifies some version of universalisation, or consideration from behind the veil, as essential to moral, though not prudential deliberation.

Although the critic is right to stress the differences between moral and practical deliberation, it is important to see that generic moral reasons cannot be ineluctable. Even Kant himself did not go so far, admitting some exceptions to his denial of the right to lie and his proscription on suicide. On some occasions, it is too much to ask of a particular individual that they be kind, or honest, or benevolent, or, in Gauguin's case, loyal and dependable. We can agree with Williams that it is asking too much of him, because of what he knows about himself and what he wants, to demand that he give up his project and remain at home with his family. Meanwhile, the virtues remain the virtues and are so 'for' all human beings everywhere, insofar as they belong to 'our' motivational set.

For Williams, it was too much to ask of Aristotle's generation that they reject slavery as an institution. As he says in *Shame and Necessity*, they could envision no other way to get their work done. They had 'nothing to put in place of it' (1993: 112-14). The perception of slavery as an optional social condition that could be legislated out of existence was unavailable. So they rationalised matters in their theory of slavery: it was either a condition deserved on the basis of one's endowments, or grossly bad luck, like suffering for a crime one did not commit.<sup>11</sup> The claustration of women had similar features. For millennia, urban societies faced two core problems: maintaining stable population levels, despite warfare on one hand and high levels of fertility on the other, and controlling violence, including fights over women motivated by sexual competition. They also had an interest in verifiable lineages. Restricting the mobility

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* Book I: iii-vii.

and participation of women looked like a good solution to all these problems, and, as Williams surmises of the slaves, any complaints were not taken too seriously (1993:112). We can look back on those days with horror and sadness at what was done to people, and with dismay at the self-deception and seemingly wilful ignorance of the powerful, but 'blame' is an attitude better reserved for those with whom we are currently engaged.

In both cases – slavery and the oppression of women – the motivational sets of those best able to effect social change altered as other solutions to the problems their societies faced emerged, and as technological innovations, such as printing, enabled slaves and women to articulate their sufferings and present their competencies to others. We can perhaps expect the same thing to happen with the current issues of animal cruelty (but how can we eat well?) global poverty (but how can we live pleasantly?) and economic exploitation (but where will I get my clothes and electronics?). But it is too much to ask of us now, that we all become vegetarians, wear our old clothes, and give away most of our income to charity. We may get there, and, if we do, the existence of a tradition of moral theorising, which tells us that the suffering of all perceiving entities matters equally, may have helped to push us along, as well as to articulate principled justifications for new practices. But the new decisive reasons that will become part of our motivational sets in that case will have been brought into being by the discovery of alternative ways of doing things that solve our problems at less moral expense.

## 5. *Conclusions*

In this essay, I have supported Williams's position that, like all consideration-presenting assertions, the presentation of Kantian or utilitarian considerations to A must reflect someone's motivational set: A's, the presenter's, or 'ours'. Metaethically, philosophical considerations such as: 'Because you could not will that everyone would do likewise in your situation.' 'Because your pains and pleasures are no more important than anyone else's' are not on a different epistemic footing from 'Because it's the family tradition,' and the limits of philosophy are such that one can possess a motivational set that is unresponsive to those sort of reasons without being irrational. In the realm of practice, a merciful attitude towards people who fail to do what, in general, a person ought to do because of their situation and character, is sometimes the right one to take, as it certainly is in the case of 'Gauguin.' Nevertheless, Kantian and utilitarian reasons are the right sorts of reasons to present to people when morality is involved. They are consistent with the 'morality system's' function of curbing



excess power, stimulating altruistic action, and opposing raw self-interest. Williams recognized that this was its function, pointing out that 'ethical egoism' was incoherent (1981: 12), but he paid little attention to the question whether modern moral theory had or continues to have an important and worthy role to play in the social and political realm.

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